The woman attempting to disrupt the ritual': Representations of femininity and the poetics of the subaltern body in contemporary Chinese female-authored poetry

Jaguscik, Justyna

"THE WOMAN ATTEMPTING TO DISRUPT THE RITUAL"

REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY AND THE POETICS OF THE SUBALTERN BODY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE FEMALE-AUTHORED POETRY

Li Xinmo's performance act "Re-writing One Hundred Years of Solitude," 2014. Photograph courtesy of the artist.
Li Xinmo (b. 1976) is a painter and performance artist who is currently based in Beijing. She is loosely associated with the feminist literary scene and has also performed pieces influenced by women's poetry. Li is an artist who "disrupts the rituals" of the mainstream art scene.

JUSTYNA JAGUSCIK · UNIVERSITY OF ZURICH

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses representations of femininity in the poetry of three women authors from China – Zhai Yongming (b. 1955), Lü Yue (b. 1972), and Zheng Xiaoqiong (b. 1980) – whose works are associated with a distinct feminine poetics. These poets do not shy away from representing their feminist point of view, and their texts are often written against the hegemony of a male-centered literary discourse. At the same time, however, they counter some of our long-standing expectations surrounding female-authored poetry.

Drawing upon examples from their works I argue that since the late 1980s, the past and present subaltern condition of women has been a crucial point of interest for women poets in Mainland China. Since then, these authors have been preoccupied with the search not only for an independent poetic language, but also for a genealogy of female creativity, to which they might adhere in their artistic endeavors.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages poetry has been regarded as a genre suitable for women in Chinese literature. It is commonly acknowledged that, with regard to numbers alone, "no nation has produced more women poets than China."[1] Yet if this is so, why have the majority of female authors sunk into oblivion? Professor Michelle Yeh, a renowned researcher and translator of Chinese poetry, noticed in one of her books, that women poets often remained "bound by literary conventions and moral constraints narrower and more rigid than those for men."[2] This opinion sheds some light on the marginalization of the female tradition in pre-modern Chinese poetry. The majority of women poets from Imperial China adhered to a highly conventional feminine (*wanyue*) writing style and, as such, were habitually considered inferior to their male counterparts by readers.[3] The skillfully composed "bound" verses

1 Kang-i Sun Chang, "Ming-Qing Women Poets and Cultural Androgyny," *Critical Studies* 18 (2002): 21-32.

2 Michelle Yeh, *Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1992), xv.

3 This writing style of "delicate restraint" was traditionally defined

of feminine poetry did not challenge the prevalent gender regimes and their symbolic representations. Most often, literary skills, like bound feet, remained the valuable asset of the elite woman trained to satisfy men's desires.[4]

Only in the twilight of the Qing Empire and the ensuing political and social upheaval did a number of women poets begin to transgress the confines of pre-established representations of women in literature. Near the end of the nineteenth century, Qiu Jin (1875-1907), one of the pioneers of "literary feminism,"[5] voiced her anger and cried out: "Arise! Arise! Chinese women, arise!"[6] No later than the next generation, numerous young women began to take up her call in an attempt to alter the face of modern Chinese literature. Chen Hengzhe (1890-1976), Bing Xin (1900-1999), and Lin Huiyin (1904-1955), to name but a few influential female voices of this era, followed Qiu Jin and "swept aside convention."[7]

It was not until the second half of the 1980s, however, that the term "women's poetry" (*nüxing shige*) entered the academic vocabulary.[8] This new critical concept was shaped by vivid discussions, which arose as the literary world struggled to get to grips with the emergence of the young Sichuan poet, Zhai Yongming (b. 1955). The publishing of her first poem sequence *Nüren* (Women) in 1986[9] is commonly believed to have marked the birth of a self-conscious female voice in modern Chinese poetry.

In the first part of this paper, I focus on the poetry of Zhai Yongming. Since her pathbreaking literary debut, Zhai has remained the most outstanding and influential figure on the feminist literary scene.[10] A consensus among literary critics exists with regard to the impact of her poetic language on an entire generation of women poets.[11] She has also been

as gentle and soft, fine and smooth, indirect, sentimental, etc. It harmonized well with the typical themes of "boudoir" poetry, such as love, grief, nostalgic longing, as well as complaints of mistreatment and abandonment. The notion of female authorship in imperial China is additionally blurred by the fact that many male poets practiced "literary cross-dressing" and expressed themselves in a conventional female voice, for example, when impersonating a nostalgic, abandoned woman. See Maija Bell Samei, *Gendered Persona and Poetic Voice. The Abandoned Woman in Early Chinese Song Lyrics* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004).

4 Recently, literary scholars have collected and anthologized numerous texts by women from the pre-modern era. This has triggered discussions about an independent female tradition in Chinese poetry. Even if these scholars argue for the existence of a not-entirely convention-ridden feminine imagery in imperial literature, they will still agree that the vast majority of women writers occupied positions on the peripheries of the literary canon. Consequently, professors of literature Kan-I Sun Chang and Haun Saussy speak of women's authorship in traditional China as a "predicament": "Women writers are very much a part of Chinese literature. Though their place has been contested, though they have encountered the usual sorts of peremptory dismissal and trivialization, and though the benefits of literary reputation typically eluded them, they did participate in that vast conversation." This "vast conversation" was, and often still is, conditioned by the traditional male-centered rhetoric. See Kan-I Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, ed., *Women Writers of Traditional China. An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999), 3.

5 Amy Dooling, *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth Century China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

6 Qiu Jin, *Stones of the Jingwei Bird*, translated in *Writing Women in Modern China*, ed. Amy Dooling and Kristina Torgeson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 4.

7 This is the closing verse from Qiu Jin's poem "An Inscription for a Portrait of Myself (in Male Dress)" translated in Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush. Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2004), 795.

8 In 1987 poetry critic and scholar Tang Xiaodu published an essay seen as the first inquiry into the original poetical language proposed by women poets. See Tang Xiaodu, "Nüxing Shige: Cong Heiye dao Baizhou" [Women's Poetry: From the Dark Night into the Bright Day], *Shikan* [Poetry Periodical] 2 (1987): 58-59.

9 Zhai Yongming, *Nüren (liu shou)* [Women (six poems)], *Shikan* 6 (1986): 13-16.

10 With feminist literary scene I refer to the group of women poet, who cooperate with the unofficial journal *Yi* [Wings]. This journal is entirely dedicated to female-authored poetry. The first issue was published in print in 1999. Since 2002 it is available online as an e-zine (http://site.douban.com/206010/room/2670940/). The main editor, the poet-scholar Zhou Zan (b. 1968), occupies a special place in contemporary Chinese poetry, not only due to the value of her own literary contributions, but also as a result of her theoretical work on women's poetry. Many of the essays and discussions published in the journal are dedicated to the concepts of feminism, women's writing and the discourse of sex/gender difference and its relation to poetry. Zhai Yongming has been coediting the journal and publishing her works there since its establishment. Other female poets who collaborate regularly with the journal are Tang Danhong (b. 1965), Lan Lan (b. 1967), Yu Xiang (b. 1970), Lü Yue (b. 1972), Mu Qing (born in the 1970s), and Cao Shuying (b. 1979). Consequently, it has to be stressed here, that I do not perceive Zhai Yongming as a representative of all women authors in China, but of those, who write against the tradition of indirect and soft feminine style in poetry. I argue that Zhai Yongming, Lü Yue and Zheng Xiaoqiong consciously adhere to a direct and forceful language in order to express their female point of view.

11 See Nan Fan, "Shenti Xiucixue: Xiaoxiang yu Xing" [Body Rhetoric: Representation and Gender], *Wenyi Zhengming* [Literature and Art Contend] 4 (1996), 30-39, Zhang Qinghua, "Fuhuo de Nüwa Chengge Dang Ku – Dangdai Zhongguo Nüxingzhuyi de Dansheng yu Nüxingzhuyi Shige" [Resurrected Nüwa is Composing Songs Full of Grieve – Birth of Contemporary Feminism in China and Feminist Poetry], *Zhongguo Nüzi Xueyuan Shandong Fenyuan Xuebao* [Scholarly Journal of the Shandong Division of Chinese Women's College] 2 (1999), 42-48, Zhang Hong Jeanne, *The Invention of a Discourse: Women's Poetry from Contemporary China* (Leiden: CNWS Publication, 2004), Zhai Yongming and Ouyang Jianghe, "Nüxing Shige" [Women's Po-

Justyna Jaguscik is Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer in the Department of Chinese Studies at the University of Zurich. She has recently concluded her PhD project on "Literary Body Discourses: Body, Gender and Class Difference in Contemporary Chinese Female-Authored Poetry and Fiction." In her dissertation she examined the distinct body poetics and rhetoric practices within female-authored texts. Jaguscik's research interests include contemporary Chinese literature, women's poetry, gender studies, as well as the post-socialist transition in China.

actively shaping the theoretic discourse of women's poetry with her numerous essays dedicated to the phenomenon of female authorship and the meaning of gender difference in literature. As a consequence of her interest in female creativity, Zhai has distanced herself from the concept of neuter literature and art. In 2010 she claimed, for example, that "not only poems are marked by gender difference, but even politics, military affairs, economics, they are all marked by gender difference."[12] Due to her avant-garde stance Zhai may be seen as representing those women authors in China who regard themselves as belonging to an alternative feminine literary tradition. Throughout the ages this tradition has been marginalized in the male-centered literary canon.

In the opening section of the paper, I briefly discuss the novelty of Zhai Yongming's poetic vocabulary, focusing particularly on the "black night" metaphor, which she introduced in her first cycle of poems as the imaginary birthplace of feminine consciousness in the post-revolutionary era. Zhai's innovative poetics took on the topic of female identity as it emerged in the moment, when the previously hegemonic representations of masculinity and femininity had already been turned into an object of critique. While a questioning of gender roles was displaced from official aesthetic discourse during the Mao era – which only accepted and reproduced a limited set of heteronormative codes for representing socialist men and women – since the 1980s a renegotiation of gender roles has begun to take place. Specifically, it was the experience of the female body that presented itself as an important point of departure in Zhai's early poetic exploration regarding the possibilities of speaking as a woman. The poet did not shy away from depicting the psychobiological dimension of women's lives. Consequently, critics identified her writings with the emergence of an original poetics of the body. This focus on previously tabooed phenomena – such as the physical experience of adolescence, menses, childbirth, and bodily decay – all retold from the distinct feminine perspective, broadened the range of poetical language. Since then, Zhai has been representing women's flesh and bodily fluids in her poetry – subjects that previously entered the somatophobic literary canon only incidentally. She was the first to bring to her verse these mundane, even abject, aspects of womanly being in the world. Consequently, Zhai's poetry may be regarded an important inspiration for the tidal wave of women's writing (*nüxing xiezuo*) during the late 1980s and 1990s.[13] These women authors' efforts to un-veil and un-silence the female body in literature has been acknowledged by succeeding critics,[14] who agree, that these poets helped at least one group "out" of their subaltern condition, namely the well-educated, urban woman.[15] These radical poets felt compelled to steer away from the hegemonic gender representations of the revolutionary era in the search for their own definition of feminine freedom.

In the main body of this paper, I introduce some representations of femininity expressed in Zhai's poems of the new Millennium. Drawing upon these examples, I argue that since the turn of the century, body poetics has remained one of the defining features of women's poetry. Nevertheless, since the late 1990s Zhai's efforts to represent female bodily experience have been matched by other female writers, who have sought to establish not only an independent poetic language, but also a relevant genealogy, a dissident line of female creativity.

As a result, not only Zhai, but also other women poets such as Yi Lei (b. 1951) and Hai Nan (b. 1962), have been revisiting the traditional regimes of gender representation from which, they argue, female bodies as well as creative powers have been displaced. Zhai's poetry and polemical essays have been essential to this trend and epistemic questioning. Perhaps like no other poet, for the last twenty years she has been concerned with the creativity and literary output of other women. Not only female authors, but also increasingly women artists have captured her attention. In the year 2008, for example, she published a collection of essays dedicated to women's art.[16] Zhai has repeatedly expressed her concerns and feeling of responsibility toward Chinese women artists, who, as she told me in an interview, may not be able to speak for themselves in the same way as writers and, consequently, remain silenced and underrepresented.[17]

In the final part of the paper, I discuss another important shift of interest that became visible in women's writing of the new century. In contrast to the nocturnal, introspective rhetoric identified with women's poetry of the 1980s and 1990s, the voice of female grief and anger has become significantly louder in the last ten years. Women still speak out against the remnants of patriarchy, but now also, and even more often, in reaction to growing social injustice on a global scale, and the associated exploitation and victimization for the sake of economic development. Significantly, when reacting in writing to manifestations of injustice and the suffering of women, some authors question, at the same time,

etry], *Dangdai Guoji Shitan* [Contemporary International Poetry] (2010), 97-124.

12 Zhai Yongming, "Nüxing Yishi, Furen Zhijian, Cisheng" [Feminine Consciousness, Women's Views, and the Female Voice], in Zhai Yongming, *Nü'er Qiang. Zhai Yongming Sanwen* [Women's Wall. Essays by Zhai Yongming] (Xiamen: Lujiang Chubanshe, 2010, dated 2008), 263.

13 Most important female novelists belonging to this wave of self-exploring women's writing are, among others, Xu Xiaobin (b. 1953), Tie Ning (b. 1957), Lin Bai (b. 1958), and Chen Ran (b. 1962).

14 See Chen Xiaoming, *Zhongguo Dangdai Wenxue Zhuchao* [Trends in Contemporary Chinese Literature] (Beijing: Beijing University Press 2009), 398-423.

15 See Xu Kun, *Shuangdiao Yexing Chuan* [*Shuangdiao*. Rowing in the Night] (Taiyuan: Shanxi Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1999), Dai Jinhua, "Class and Gender in Contemporary Chinese Literature," in ed. Tao Jie, et al., *Holding Up Half the Sky*, (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2004), 289-301.

16 Zhai Yongming, *Tianfu ruci* [Born in this Way] (Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 2008).

17 I interviewed Zhai in 2010 in Beijing. The interview was later published as "Yu Yang Shuang Yi Xi Tan" [A Talk With Yang Shuang (Justyna Jaguscik)] in *Xingshi Pinglun* [New Poetry Review] 2 (2012), 254-276.

their right to speak of other women's predicaments. While reclaiming the right to the expression of gender difference, feminine sexuality and subjective experience was crucial to women's writing of the early post-Mao era, speaking of these phenomena today remains difficult, but for different reasons. I analyze two poems by Lü Yue and Zhai Yongming to show the current aporia in the representation of women's bodies in the time of an all-engulfing global media spectacle.

In the closing section of the paper I refer to the example of Zheng Xiaoqiong (b. 1980), who, like her elder counterparts, has transgressed her subaltern position through the poetic act. Belonging to a younger generation and being of rural origin, Zheng speaks from a different position than Zhai Yongming or Lü Yue. Nevertheless, she shares with them the faith that, in spite of everything, writing poetry as a way of enacting female agency still matters.

BEGINNINGS: THE BLACK NIGHT AND THE BODY POETICS

A distinctive bodily poetics was intrinsic to the innovative language proposed by women poets of the 1980s and '90s. Previously, genuine representations of female bodily experience had been excluded, not only from the Maoist era's aesthetic canon of revolutionary realism and romanticism, but also from pre-modern traditions. Consequently, a celebration of gender difference and the emergence of feminine consciousness in women's poetry of the 1980s became essential to bidding farewell to the Maoist "iron girl" model of femininity (or its evident lack). Jeanne Hong Zhang, author of the only scholarly work in English dedicated to post-Mao Chinese women's poetry, aptly summarizes the significance of women's poetry engaged in this process by stating that the "writing of the female body by Chinese women poets sends out a strong message against political and discursive restraints."[18] Within a period of only three years, from 1985 to 1988, sometimes called the "golden age" (*fanrongqi*) of women's poetry,[19] poetical self-representations of female bodily experience challenged the traditionally "somatophobic" high-brow literature. Women poets, followed shortly afterwards by a group of female novelists, were the first to introduce a self-assured female persona into literature. As has already been mentioned in the Introduction, this figure expressed herself in an innovative poetic language, the origin of which may be traced back to Zhai Yongming. With her "black night," she inspired her fellow women poets to transgress the limits of the official genderless language.[20] In their rebellion against convention-ridden constructions of femininity as found in classical and modern poetry, these poets created a novel female imaginary, a chthonic, nocturnal, and sensual world. They filled this feminine space with insights gained in the process of revising myths, re-reading symbols, and recovering long-forgotten heroines. In this way, female authors sought to establish a feminine culture, one that would finally provide them with "a room of their own."[21]

The woman who inhabited this room depicted femininity in an unfamiliar mode. All the main traits of this new post-Mao poetic representation of femininity may be found, for the very first time, in the preface Zhai Yongming wrote to her twenty-poem cycle, *Women*. This short introductory essay, titled "Black Night Consciousness,"[22] was composed in 1984 and published officially for the first time in 1993. The heading of this text already includes two images essential to the female-authored "revolution in poetic language,"[23] namely, the dark and nocturnal nature of the new feminine consciousness. In her literary debut, Zhai Yongming wrote not only herself, but also other women, back into the realm of darkness of the "black night." It was a significant and, at the same time, subversive poetic gesture, which marked a definitive break with the dominant intellectual rhetoric of the Republican and Maoist eras, both of which promoted ideals of modernization through scientific enlightenment and technical progress. Since the late Qing, reformers, in their attempts to enlighten society, have turned darkness, or, literally, the dark night, into a standard metaphor of the misery that women suffered at the hands of such a traditional, backward society. Zhai Yongming's creative re-appropriation of the "black night" therefore undermined the linguistic domain of revolutionary modernity and engendered a new "line of flight"[24] in women's history. In the rhetoric of the modernizers, the "black night" represented the backward and oppressive past, from which the progressive intellectuals desired to free themselves. She, the black night – the woman – was to be enlightened, first by the technical progress of electric lamps, and shortly after, through the cult of the Reddest Red Sun. Zhai Yongming undermined this mindset in her early texts

[18] Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse*, 64.

[19] Zhou Zan, Untitled interview with Zhai Yongming, reprinted in *Shige yu Ren* [Poetry and People], ed. Huang Lihai and Bu Yongtao (unofficial publication, 2003), 29.

[20] Later on Zhai described her own influence on many young poets who started to imitate her as a "black whirlwind" (*hei xuanfeng*). See Andrea Lingenfelter, "Translator's Foreword," in trans. Andrea Lingenfelter, *The Changing Room. Selected Poetry of Zhai Yongming* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2011), xiv.

[21] Zhai Yongming revisits the beginings of contemporary women's poetry in Mainlaind China in some of her essays. Due to the political situation, the literary education of her generation was rather random and interrupted, but she was familiar with the conventional canon of classic Chinese poetry. Her self-study of women's literature started later. Zhai, along with other women poets and critics, however acknowldges the initial inspiration influence of Western female-authored and feminist texts, specifically Sylvia Plath's confessional poetry. See Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse*, 36-41.

[22] Zhai Yongming, "Heiye de yishi," in Zhang Qinghua, *Zhongguo xin shiqi nüxing yanjiu ziliao* [Materials for researching women's [writing] of the Chinese new era] (Jinan: Shandong Wenyi Chubanshe, 2006), 70-72.

[23] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

[24] See Brian Massumi, "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgments," in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xvi.

with the creation of a dark space in which female subjectivity was imagined independently of the aggressive masculine narrative of progress.

Primarily, the turn back to the "black night" offered a novel language in which femininity could be represented in the post-Mao era.[25] At the same time, it marked an opening towards alternative systems of perception and knowledge that had remained outside the rationale of the masculine "cogito." These mythological, sensual, pre-secular ways of perceiving and being had been gradually expelled from mainstream culture, be it Confucian or revolutionary. The discourse of women's poetry embraced these previously silenced phenomena, such as the experience of the female body and spirit. For example, Zhai Yongming pointed in her earliest texts to this emancipatory, but also fatal, potential buried in the "black night:"

> "An inborn inner fear and a destructive premonition are hidden in women's bodies. It is this presentiment that, in a reality brimming with all possibilities, eventually let us be absorbed by a predestination from which there is no redemption. For these reasons, the woman poet expands her own mythical world, linked to the moment of birth, as well as to the netherworld. On this increasingly blurred boundary, it is keeping to the truth of the inner darkness that allows you, after you have been painfully enlightened, to discover the black night consciousness. Only this is the destruction of your personal anxiety. (...)
>
> [The black night consciousness] allowed me to free myself to a state of pure knowledge and experience of myself, society and humankind."[26]

An unprecedented outburst of female creativity followed the publication of this text and numerous women authors began to experiment with nocturnal imagery. In their literary endeavors, they not only focused on the destiny of their own generation, but also "explored their own mythical world," tracing feminine paths from the past as well as from distant geographies. Their poems may therefore be regarded as belonging to the global archives of women's history.

REVISITING THE PAST

Since the 1990s Chinese women poets have established a poetic repository of inquiries into the lives of other women, in which femininity is most often represented as a tragic or, at least, precarious position. For instance, Zhai Yongming's endeavors to recover the authentic female voice in poetry may be best encapsulated as an exploration of the boundaries imposed by the "premonition" (or alternatively, in Chang and Saussy's words, the "predicament"), mentioned in her early essay "Black Night Consciousness."

One of the poetic images that Zhai introduces in her writing to represent a feminine way of being in the world is the so-called "women's wall" (*nü qiang*). In 1996 she wrote an essay dedicated to this ancient architectonic structure,[27] and to date it has remained a significant metaphor in her writing. Her latest selection of prose works, which consists of entirely new contributions along with revisions of older essays, was published, for example, under the title "Nü'er Qiang" (Women's Wall). Additionally, in her latest collection of poetry, published in 2012, Zhai included a revised version of a longer poem, also entitled "Nü'er Qiang."[28]

It is not only in her essay dedicated to the "women's wall," but also in many of her other works, that Zhai depicts pre-modern, as well as contemporary, ideals of femininity as being constructed through the imposition of various confinements primarily meant to discipline female bodies. This recurrent motif may be found, for example, in the long poem "Yu Xuanji Fu" (Rhapsody on Yu Xuanji, written in 2005).[29] In Zhai's opinion, Yu Xuanji (c. 844 – c. 871) was one of the most gifted women poets in Chinese history and, consequently, one of the heroines of the recovered female tradition in literature. In addition, Yu was a famous concubine, and an alleged murderer; the poetess was found guilty of murdering her servant girl out of jealousy. Due to her low social status and, moreover, to accusations of having committed a scandalous atrocity, for which she eventually paid with her life, Yu Xuanji's works were generally not included in the strict canon of Tang poetry. In her poem, Zhai not only retells Yu's short life-story, but also inquires into the reasons behind the marginalization of women writers in the history of literature.

According to Zhai, in traditional society there was no place from which female authors could exercise their agency in any lasting way. Nevertheless, she admits that the act of writing, if performed by a woman, is itself a mode of negation of male-centered rhetoric. Accordingly, literary creativity allowed brief moments of self-fulfillment, in which the female subject could feel empowered to speak with an unrestrained voice, giving her momentary escape from the subaltern con-

[25] Concurrently, it was as well an attempt to re-appropriate and recast the Chinese *yin* and *yang* cosmology along feminist lines.

[26] Zhai, "Heiye de Yishi," 70. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese are mine.

[27] First published in Zhai Yongming, *Zhishang Jianzhu* [Edifices on Paper] (Shanghai: Dongfang Chuban Zhongxin, 1997, dated 1996), 15-20. Later revised and reprinted in Zhai Yongming, "Nü'er Qiang," in Zhai, *Nü'er Qiang. Zhai Yongming Sanwen*, 129-133.

[28] Zhai Yongming, "Nü'er Qiang," in Zhai Yongming, Hang jian Ju: Shiji 2008-2012 [The Space between the Lines: Collected Poems 2008-2012] (Chongqing: Chongqing Daxue Chubanshe), 49-53. "Women's wall" (nü qiang) is the term Zhai introduces first in her essay. It was originally used in pre-modern literature to refer to a certain type of architectonic structure, a wall approximately 90 centimeters high. With the modern expression nü'er qiang, which literally means "daughter's wall, " the poet refers directly to a painting under the same title by He Duoling, which depicts a small girl standing behind a wall. In what follows, she uses the ancient "women's wall" and contemporary "daughter's wall" synonymously. In my translation I use "women's wall" for both of them.

[29] Zhai Yongming, "Yu Xuanji Fu," in Zhai Yongming, *Zui Weiwan de Ci* [Most Delicate Verses] (Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 2008), 74-81.

dition before she was necessarily bound up in that discourse again. Despite the possibility of such brief spells of freedom, Zhai acknowledges that, in pre-modern times, the status of "woman poet" was a subject position only available to female authors who showed "delicate restraint" in their writings and obeyed to the rules of the patriarchal order in their lives.[30]

In her "rhapsody" Zhai Yongming focuses on real and imagined boundaries. The first image to emerge in the poem is that of Yu Xuanji locked in a cangue on her way to the execution site, after she has been found guilty of murdering her maid. Zhai then lifts this scene into a universal dimension in describing the yoke as simply another type of female "attire" to be "worn." Concurrently, in a play of intertextuality, she alludes to the following verse from Yu Xuanji's original text: "I resent these gauze robes of mine, which conceal lines of a poem ..."[31]

Both the ancient and the contemporary poet associate feminine garments, a metaphor for the "other sex," with yokes, suggesting that they limit women's physical and social mobility in similar ways. Zhai interprets Yu Xuanji's lamentation of her "inferior", female position as more than just the expression of an individual's frustration with the impossibility of living up to their ambitions. In Zhai's opinion, it symbolizes the collective destiny of many anonymous women in pre-modern times:

> "Cangues were the attire of many ancient women
> Fluttering all over the sky strung together
> They could turn into white kites but could not rise up to the heavens."[32]

The aforementioned "women's wall" is another confining boundary that Zhai Yongming has recovered from the past to represent the destiny of the female sex. In her essay "Women's Wall," Zhai introduces several pre-modern textual references that mention this ancient architectonic structure. This low wall with its uneven surface may be found, for example, in the writings of Liu Yuxi (772-842) or Li Yu (1610-1680). Zhai agrees with Li Yu's sarcastic comment from *Xian Qing Ou Qi* (Casual Expressions of Idle Feelings) that even if this short wall was sometimes claimed to have a defensive function, in everyday life it was actually understood mainly as means of restraining women's visibility and mobility.[33] In what follows, Zhai focuses on the connection between the "women's wall" and the gaze. Indeed, Zhai shows that this link was already made in the earliest etymological definitions of this construction.

This should come as no surprise to readers acquainted with contemporary feminist discussions.[34] Significantly, in her inquiry into the meaning of the "women's wall", Zhai advances a reading that looks beyond its obviously obstructive and hindering qualities and focuses much more on the aporetic nature of the "women's wall." According to her, while the wall confined women, it was also capable of stimulating their transgressive desires.

Here Zhai Yongming suggests the potential existence of pre-modern female agency, which she claims could express itself in certain circumstances, such as under the influence of passionate love. The wall was not high enough to completely obstruct the young maidens' field of vision and sometimes only one curious glimpse sufficed to discover the beloved one. According to Zhai, these short moments, in which women's gazes crossed boundaries, were often the most precious. They allowed them to escape, symbolically, their enclosure in the traditional courtyard:

> "In ancient times women were confined for long times in the depths of the inner quarters, and they were not allowed to leave the houses. Nevertheless, this low wall reached only the height of their shoulders, and could not really prevent women living inside the house from occasionally taking a glimpse into the spring air outside. Moreover, the wall is a dead object, and humans are certainly alive, so the women's wall became a popular [literary] motif in ancient times. Specifically, this architectural form influenced the way in which the ancient women peeped, and it formed their peeping nature. Often one glimpse was enough for them to discover their sweetheart, or to change their lives."[35]

In Zhai Yongming's writing, the women's wall functions as a double-edged sword. It was originally built with the intention of separating upper-class women from the outside world, subjecting them to the power of their kin. Consequently, it symbolized the spatial isolation and displacement of women from the public domain, which was furthermore paralleled by the marginalization of feminine creativity within the symbolic realm of traditional China.

Zhai's reading does not, however, end with this conclusion. Subsequently, the poet deconstructs the physical obstacle with her claim that it paradoxically opened a space for the negation of the patriarchal order by the not-fully tamed female gaze.

It is not only women's creativity and sight that Zhai associates with a subversive or transgressive potentiality hidden within the feminine margins, a force, she suggests, which is strong enough to intervene into the Confucian routine of ancient China. With her poem "Women's Wall" she adds another dimension to the picture, one that is indispensable for traditional representations of femininity – the supernatural. A low wall was often described in the genre of *chuanqi*, conventionally defined as stories reporting "weird or unusual love

---

30 See Zhai's essay dedicated to Yu Xuanji, Zhai Yongming, "Zihen Luo Yi Yan Shiju" [I Resent These Gauzes of Mine, Which Conceal Lines of a Poem], *Nü'er Qiang*, 253.

31 Translated in *Women Writers of Traditional China*, Chang and Saussy, ed. 75.

32 Zhai, "Yu Xuanji Fu," 74, translated by Justyna Jaguscik and Helen Wallimann.

33 Zhai quotes from Li Yu, *Xian Qing Ou Qi* [Casual Expressions of Idle Feelings] in *Li Yu Quanji* [The Collected Works of Li Yu] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Guji Chubanshe 1991), vol. 3, 183. Here I paraphrase the pages 131-132 from Zhai's essay.

34 See for example Laura Mulvey's classic essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975): 6-18.

35 Zhai, "Nü'er Qiang", 130.

affairs" and "leaning towards the supernatural."[36] In a great number of such tales, the male protagonist, by crossing the wall, entered into a dangerous realm of strangeness which was the territory of female ghosts:

> "(...) There is no sight of the tale of the White Snake[37] in this world
> and there is either no sight of Nie Xiaoqian[38]
> They wrote poems chanted poems
> Fell in love with scholars suffered from love sickness
> Why do they always appear as female bodies?
> Hidden next to *Taihu* stones or hidden behind the women's wall
> They are materialized ghosts blood turned green
> for the sake of disguising themselves
> for the sake of conjugal bliss."[39]

This stanza not only mentions the woman's wall, but brings together other popular features essential to the representation of femininity in pre-modern times. Again, Zhai focuses on boundaries and potential moments of transgressions. In addition, the opposing acts of veiling and unveiling play an important role since in order to find love and happiness, the female spirits need to hide their true shape and masquerade as mortal women. Once more, women's creativity and literary talents are placed outside the space of conventional femininity. In fact they become associated with the dangerous and the demonic realm.

Zhai Yongming's poetical "herstories" show how throughout the ages women have been forced to surrender to the patriarchal order and to sacrifice much of their freedom, sensibilities, and happiness. The range of their mobility, vision, and writing has been restricted by the rules inherent within the traditional social order. Zhai's writings, moreover, point to the coexistence of two mutually exclusive images of femininity in Imperial China. On the one hand there was the normative ideal of the dutiful wife and loving mother, hidden behind the women's wall in the inner quarters of the traditional courtyards. These women, who subjected themselves to this special regime, were idealized for their purity and virtue in mainstream literature. They were represented and spoken for by men. Particularly in poetry, femininity was highly conventionalized and reduced to a question of style:

> "But, in times of women's absence [from society], "*weiwan-pai*" [the soft and feminine style] was adopted as a masculine substitute for the expression of the female voice. We may say, the "female voice," produced by men, was saturated with male narcissism and male fantasies of the feminine."[40]

Yet there was also, on the other hand, the image of the demonic, fallen woman that existed in folk stories, and which became an important source of inspiration for the *chuanqi* genre. These stories showed that transgression was possible, but even more they warned of its consequences.

Contemporary women poets regard this uneasy heritage as essential to their own artistic empowerment. They connect their own "black night consciousness" with an older, alternative feminine literary tradition, which emerged on the margins of the literary canon, for example in the folk tale. In addition, in her poem "Nü'er Qiang," Zhai calls the women hidden behind the garden wall her "sisters" (*jiemei*).[41] In doing so, she points to another important feature of the female literary tradition, namely, the feeling of solidarity among (writing) women. These bonds also became a viable means of transgressing the limitations imposed by the patriarchal order. To date, they see the close cooperation of women writers and feminist critics as essential to establishing and strengthening the position of the female author within the literary field.

THE SPECTACLE OF THE FEMALE BODY

One of the problems women artists currently encounter is the hyper-visibility of the female body in popular culture. Many of these images are designed for commercial purposes and cater to the scopophilic gaze of the male viewer. This is naturally the case in many contemporary pornographic productions, but even in run-of-the-mill cultural entertainment the scantly clad heroine is omnipresent. This everyday objectification of the female body and its anatomical units overshadows any representation of the gendered body.

Not surprisingly, women poets in China have recently found themselves trapped by this dilemma. As already mentioned, the 1980s saw the introduction of a distinctive bodily poetics, thanks to which even the most intimate experiences could finally be expressed on feminine terms. Consequently, female-authored representations of love, sexuality, eroticism, and bodily sensation played a central role in the process of renegotiating gender roles in the post-Mao era. Since the turn of the century, and with the ongoing integration of China into the global media landscape, little remains of the revolutionary asceticism of the Maoist utopia. In response to the changing socio-economic context, women poets have become increasingly self-reflective in their writings. Their latest works reflect a growing awareness of the impossibility of simplistic gender representations.

In her poem "Zhi yige Qitu Pohuai Yishi de Nüren" (To a Woman Attempting to Disrupt the Ritual) the author

[36] Wilt Idema and Lyold Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature* (Ann Arbour: The University of Michigan, 1997), 135.

[37] The famous tragic love story of a white snake spirit that lived in the Western Lake in Hangzhou. The spirit transformed into a woman and happily fell in love with a young man. Her husband died of shock after discovering that his wife was not human.

[38] Nie Xiaoqian was one of the many beautiful female ghosts depicted in Pu Songling's collection of fanciful stories, *Liaozhai Zhi Yi*. Nie became the ghost wife of a Ning Caichen, an upright scholar who saved her from evil demons. Nie's love for Ning and her commitment to his family were rewarded with the restoration of her human nature. Significantly, Nie was also a gifted painter. For the English translation of the story see trans. Sidney Sondergard, *Strange Tales from Liaozhai by Pu Songling*, vol. 1 (Fremont: Jain Publishing Company 2008), 223-241.

[39] Zhai Yongming, "Nü'er Qiang," 51.

[40] Zhai Yongming, *Nü'er Qiang*, 266.

[41] Zhai Yongming, "Nü'er Qiang," 49.

Lü Yue (b. 1972) describes a foreign female protester who is eventually turned into a media spectacle for an international TV audience. The stranger's desperate performance remains inscrutable to those in front of the screen. Furthermore, instead of struggling to make sense of it, they conveniently focus on her body and attire, "typically" feminine attributes that are used to evaluate a woman's public performance. In this poem Lü Yue suggests that one of the possible reasons behind the misreading of the stranger's performance is her gender:

> "To a Woman Attempting to Disrupt the Ritual
>
> On a Paris street, handsome young policemen stop a foreign woman attempting to disrupt a diplomatic ritual. One holds her armpits, one grasps her legs, smiles on their faces, she is being taken away to a police vehicle, which is spread with sweet scents, she is taken away, toward the TV screens of the entire world. Five billion judges sitting on their sofas, they ask for an even closer shot... We don't know this woman, this woman is Tibetan, and Tajik, Rwandan, Taliban, she is Jewish, we know this woman, this woman is woman's.
>
> She screams with excitation like a monkey, and grasps the policemen's hands as if she were on a swing, exposing parts of her belly's skin
>
> the abdomen is hard enough to be used as a bullet, sleek enough to climb on the male gang's title pages
> there is no embrasure on its surface, only the uncivilized shape of the navel, like us
>
> She has all the parts that we have
>
> A white T-shirt, grey jeans, a scarf and a belt, shoes and socks, earrings fingerings necklaces
>
> It disappoints us that she has not made herself up as a hairy foreigner
>
> There is no polytheistic golden tattoo on her left arm
> She is not hiding a purple tail in her jeans."[42]

Lü Yue seems deeply pessimistic about the possibility of any sort of female-authored disruption of rituals in the contemporary world, which operates mainly through the complicity of male-centered politics, state powers, and media agencies. Furthermore, she negates the widespread belief that public protest, here literally on a global stage, enlarges the possibility of reaching one's goals. So long as the audience refuses to leave the intellectual comfort zone of their sofa, this subversive act will be understood as mere entertainment. Lü shows how, in the mass media, gender and ethnic differences are being turned into a spectacle of "otherness" and "sameness." If the ethnic performance is perceived as "inauthentic" and fails to match up with common fantasies of "exotic femininity," it will finally be judged as disappointing and uncivilized by the audience.

The anonymous woman from Lü Yue's poem emerges in an era in which the international audience is instantly updated on the plights women encounter all around the world. We have been nourished by images of veiled women as symbols of oppression, or of abusive conditions in sweatshops where those in power pray upon vulnerable women and children. While the representation of the other "third world" woman as a passive victim seems to be rather "unproblematic", Lü Yue's poem points to the difficulties a woman encounters when she attempts to transgress the conventional role of a silent observer.[43] She exposes herself to the risk of being misread, due to the fact that her show of feminine agency does not conform to public expectation. In doing so, she recalls the figure of the subaltern in Gayatri Spivak's much-discussed well-known text.[44] She may, in fact, be introduced through Spivak's own words: "Here is a woman who tried to be decisive in *extremis*. She 'spoke,' but women did not, do not, 'hear' her. Thus she can be defined as a 'subaltern' – a person without lines of social mobility."[45] The female protester of the poem cries out in a convulsive act of self-representation, aiming at the establishment of a counter-discourse to the diplomatic rituals of global politics, which do not speak for her. Instantly, the protester's desperate performance is re-presented as an image of the media for an international audience. Consequently, Lü Yue's poem may be read as a discussion of the duplicity of representation, a distinction that is also crucial in Spivak's reasoning. Both authors open their texts with an inquiry into the idea of representation as displaying a nexus between aesthetics and politics and which thus becomes inextricably linked to notions of "looking at" and "speaking for" others.

Furthermore, they both seem to agree that representation inevitably involves a betrayal to specific connotations of gender, race, and class. In Lü Yue's poem the demonstrating stranger fails not only once, but actually "five billion times," with every single act of misreading that takes place in front of the TV screen. This misrecognition, or inadequacy of a carefully planned dissident act, plays a similarly significant role in Spivak's argument. In her text, she recalls the story of a young Indian female independence fighter, who committed suicide because she found herself unable to confront the task of political assassination. Nevertheless, the unhappy insurgent was later remembered by her family as the girl who had terminated her life in the course of an illicit love affair.

---

[42] Published online in a collection of ten feminist poems, assessed Aug. 15, 2014, http://www.china-gad.org/Treasure/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=13188.

[43] For example the recent discussions around the feminist protest group Femen demonstrate the political topicality of Lü Yue's concerns.

[44] Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillian Education, 1988), 271-313. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? (Abbreviated by the Author)," in ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 28-37.

[45] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? (Abbreviated by the Author)," 28.

This failure of communication finally brought Spivak to her conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak.[46]

Another question that is closely linked with the political dimension in Spivak's text is the representational responsibility for the intellectual female author with regard to lower-class women. Women poets in China, even if often silenced and displaced from the literary field in the past, have since the 1980s successfully established a discourse of women's poetry. Even if they still suffer from gender discrimination in an unequal society, their position can no longer be seen through the theoretical lens of subalternity. At the same time, in the course of China's economic transformation, women particularly from the lower social strata have been confronted by their increasing vulnerability.[47] These women have been made to suffer not only as a result of structural inequality, but primarily in relation to an insecurity. This insecurity is brought about by their previously marginal experiences of unemployment and migration, as well as through the rise of the sex business and possibly related eruptions of gender-based violence. These issues have not gone unnoticed by female intellectuals, who have embraced the uneasy task of speaking for these other women.

Zhai Yongming's poem "Guanyu Chuji de yi ci Baodao"[48] (Report on a Child Prostitute) sheds light on the ambiguous character of this well-meant task. This text is based on the newspaper report of a twelve-year-old peasant girl who was abducted and forced into prostitution. By the time her father found her, she was half dead. The lyrical voice recalls the story with journalistic candor and with a focus on the physical and psychological damage inflicted on the child. The poem is first of all the poet's enraged response to the cruel reality of a world gone berserk. Nevertheless, Zhai does not want to downplay the problematic fact that her text is actually based on a media re-presentation of a personal tragedy. The poet asks herself how to speak about this incident in a meaningful way without simply reproducing the spectacle of subaltern suffering delivered daily by the mass media. She agrees with Lü Yue's sober opinion that such hardship is most often converted back into the common object of nonreflective consumption:

> "In part she's just a picture in the paper
> 12 years old standing in a group of girls
> You can't see she's missing an ovary
> You could say it's just a story in the news
> Every day our eyes take in thousands of pieces of information
> They control the pleasures of consumers
> They stream by just like this "item"
> Masses of information hotlines and global perspectives
> Like a huge rough rug wiping away one person's feeble suffering
> People like us take a glance and that's all
> Crumple up the paper stuff it in a dark metal bin"[49]

With their poems, Zhai and Lü both address the indifference with which the audience reacts to re-presentations of the subaltern experience. In addition, Zhai voices her ethical doubts about composing a poem based on this tragedy. From an aesthetic point of view, the proper poetic language in which this crime could be represented seems not to exist. It is beyond the scope of the conventionally feminine, or soft and gentle (*weiwan*), voice in Chinese poetry. Furthermore, it cannot be retold in the masculine voice of the heroic tradition, which provides neither the relevant vocabulary to represent such sexual violence, or the pain of the female victim. Zhai finally confesses to the reader:

> "Reading the paper I keep thinking:
> You can't write a poem about this
> You can't turn poetry into something like this
> You can't chew up a poem
> Or hammer words into teeth to constantly bite
>
> (...)
>
> Poem, bandages, photos, memory
> They scratch at my eyes
> (Here in the retinal zone where dark and light meet)
> It's all quite clear: it's useless
> No one cares about this damage
> It's just a daily quotient of data
> Creating a life of misery for someone else"[50]

In one of her later essays, Zhai discussed the growing interest of writing intellectuals in the lives of those belonging to the lower strata. She perceives the re-entry of these disenfranchised groups into the intellectuals' field of perception as logically connected with (and continuing) the critical spirit of May Fourth literature. The poet significantly repeats, in this essay, some questions already raised in "Report of the Child Prostitute;" these are questions concerned particularly with the possibility of an engaged, artistic re-presentation of the subaltern:

> "However, the contemporary 'writing of the lower strata' is doubtlessly a return to this [May Fourth] tradition and its continuation. It brings the community of the 'silent ones' at the bottom of society to the fore and expresses their collective demands (...).

[46] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 103-104.

[47] Zhai Yongming expressed her concerns about the deteriorating position of women under the current revival of Confucian culture. See Andrea Lingenfelter, "China's Foremost Feminist Poet Zhai Yongming Converses on Her Art, Her Bar and Chinese Women's Writing, Past and Present," an interview with Zhai published in the online journal *Full Tilt* 5, accessed Oct. 28, 2014, http://fulltilt.ncu.edu.tw/Content.asp?I_No=35, as well as Zhai, "Yu Yang Shuang Yi Xi Tan", 262-264.

[48] Zhai Yongming, "Guanyu Chuji de yi ci Baodao," in Zhai, *Zui Weiwan de Ci*,17-19. Translated as "Report on a Child Prostitute," in Lingenfelter, *The Changing Room*, 148-153.

[49] Lingenfelter, *The Changing Room*, 151-153. Translation modified.

[50] Ibid. Translation modified.

> What must be stressed here is that the [recognition of the] social responsibility of literature does not mean that esthetic merits have to be sacrificed; literature is an important art form. Accordingly, it has its own distinctive rules and features and even where the social function of literature is emphasized its esthetic character must be preserved; "lower strata literature" being no exception."[51]

SUBALTERN SELF-REPRESENTATION

Since the turn of the century, the struggle of the lower classes under the post-socialist regime has become a prominent subject, and not only in writings by professional authors. Concurrently, the literary phenomenon of the writing of the lower strata (*diceng xiezuo*) has become one of the focal points of recent discussions in the literary field. As I have demonstrated in the previous section, after the turn of the century – in reaction to the growing awareness of social divisions – the no-longer subaltern woman author turned her attention towards the disenfranchised classes and ethnic other. At the same time, however, it became gradually clearer that silent and absent rural women were no longer universally confined to that position. Some of them have already begun to write from this position and are showing themselves to be capable of self-representation. They are, however, still only a small minority, while the majority remains captured in silence and is, at best, re-presented in a similar manner to the ones described by Zhai Yongming and Lü Yue.

A telling example may be found in Zheng Xiaoqiong's literary career (b. 1980). Zheng is the most recognized female poet now writing out of and on behalf of this social stratum, and her works embrace the task of representation with as much fervor as the older women poets with an intellectual background. Her poems also document the search for an alternative self-representation, located outside the prevailing popular, masculine imaginary, in which the underclass woman, especially, most often figures as a silent victim or a sexual object. In line with earlier women poets, who adopted a nocturnal poetics as a means of countering the enlightened masculine cogito, Zheng also remains critical of the ritualized celebration of modernization and development. Her criticism is however primarily grounded in the bodily experiences of female migrant workers.

Consequently, one of the recurrent figures indispensable to the articulation of her critique of global capitalism, industrialization, and patriarchal traditions, is the subjected and suffering female body. By repeatedly invoking this image, she reveals the true cost of economic growth, and furthermore, shows that as a general rule they are disproportionately paid by lower-class women. In her early poetry cycle titled "Jinhualun" (The Theory of Evolution), for example, Zheng thematizes the unequal power relations in an anonymous city. She shows how the weak (women from the countryside) are exploited and preyed upon by the stronger "species" (men):

> "(...) the buildings of the male city glimmer before me
> the glass signs are full of female bodies. The amazing spring awakening of the overwintered seedbed of lust
> The mask of the city is growing inside my occluded veins, an earthworm hibernating in the lower strata
> Its gloomy look, women sitting in the pool of neon lights. Their bodies
> in crude shower rooms, naked charm, the city square erected by man's tool
> The weight of restless lights has compressed the earth, and bent the feminine body
> The women's duckweed-like roots plunge through the city's concrete ground."
>
> (from "Jianjiao de Qiuyin" Shrieking earthworm)[52]

In each of the six poems of this cycle, Zheng addresses the multiple dimensions of social inequality, which primarily originates from the intersection of gender with rural background, but cannot simply be reduced to the interplay of these two factors. Furthermore, both here and in other poems, Zheng often introduces a historical dimension to demonstrate that the current situation is only the most recent actualization in a long tradition of physical co-option by the wealthy and powerful throughout the ages. In her skillful poetic montage of swiftly alternating lyrical images, Zheng moves freely between different enactments of injustice, showing the exploitation of nature, women, the rural environment and finally, of certain nations and regions within the global capitalist order:

> "(...) the economists cry out
> the market economy has no heart, the weak are prey to the strong, my rural sisters have no alternative but
> to be dished up on their beds, the economists' books devoid of humanity become the compass of the market economy,
> carved into the nation's dead bones, carved into the ribs of the rural poor.
> Its green bodily fluids like flowing tidal waves, and all the time I sit in the heart of darkness in the South,
> seeing with my own eyes my sisters becoming infertile among the chemical products, their sighs
> become the wounds of our times (...)"
>
> (from "Jiuri de Zhizhu", Spider from the Old Days)[53]

Similar images may be found in many of Zheng's poems. As a consequence, she is best known for her representations of the pained female body, which publicly expose the suffering of workers shut off behind factory walls. Zheng con-

[51] Zhai Yongming, "Wenxue de Shehui Chengdan he 'Diceng Xiezuo'" [Literature's Social Responsibility and 'Lower Strata Rriting'], accessed Dec. 7, 2013, http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/49157/49165/7107816.html, accessed December 7, 2013.

[52] Zheng Xiaoqiong, "Jinhualun" (The Theory of Evolution), Zheng Xiaoqiong's blog, accessed Aug. 11, 2014, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45a57d3001000ak6.html. Unless otherwise noted, all poems by Zheng Xiaoqiong are translated by Justyna Jaguscik and Helen Wallimann.

[53] Ibid.

stantly revisits these places of injury, be it factories or brothels, and fixes in her texts the traumatic symptoms that many of her fellow workers have suffered. She wants them to be remembered, and from this perspective, her highest achievement has been bringing these obscured bodies back into the public vision. Thanks to her, the pain of an anonymous, silent assembly line worker is represented in the "elite" genre of poetry:

> "(...)
> and nobody notices that the woman worker at the machine is having her period
> the tide surging within her body, under her trembling shoulders
> silent pain, cut off by the cutter bar, pounded to pieces
> her helplessness, the scared look in her eyes, her noiseless sighs
> all drowned out by the industrial age, everything industry breeds
> inevitably engulfs her entirety, her body, her soul
> her thoughts, her dreams, cut out, reassembled to become
> Glossy goods on the shelves, waiting to be sold."[54]

Zheng Xiaoqiong was a migrant worker herself, and even if her poetic talent allowed her to switch the production line for a desk, she remains bound to her responsibility as a witness for all female workers. Through the subversive act of poetry she writes herself out of the subaltern condition. Today she is recognized as an author and cultural worker that represents and re-presents the painful existence of factory workers, which otherwise would remain untold, hidden behind the factory and "women's walls" of China's South.

CONCLUSION

At the high tide of women's writing in the post-Mao era, female authors devoted themselves to the exploration of topics of subjectivity and sexual difference. Both were represented through the "black night consciousness," the rise of which enabled a revision of previous gender representations. After centuries of being displaced, silenced or spoken for by men, women authors were primarily concerned with challenging the gender-unspecific artistic ideals of Maoism. At the same time, however, they questioned the subaltern status of women in the patriarchal tradition. As the example of Zhai Yongming has shown, women poets surveyed the changing boundaries through which the feminine condition had been delineated. These poets aimed at the representation of various moments of women's manifest agency, and its subsequent periods of silence. They traced ruptures in the traditional symbolic order caused by the eruption of female creativity and recovered subversive acts as milestones in the process of establishing their own system of reference. Finally, they successfully broke away from the dominant poetics, with its male-oriented linguistic traditions, to establish a counter-discourse in women's poetry.[55]

While the effort to recover women from the past may be generally seen as unproblematic, some women poets are becoming increasingly aware of the current representational impasse. Significantly, as the aforementioned examples of Lü Yue and Zhai Yongming show, women poets have manifested a growing interest in not only local, but also global structures of constraint to which women have been subjected.

The migrant worker poet Zheng Xiaoqiong has gained poetic credibility for documenting the suffering originating from this new captivity. In line with the older generation of poets, she has also been searching for moments of transgression, which are still possible in these oppressive, inhuman conditions. While her general opinion of future development remains deeply pessimistic, she seems to agree with the older poets on the transgressive potential of writing poetry and love. In her poem "Ju" (Play) we find the following (self-) representation of a female migrant worker as a poet:

> "(...) other people imagine her life
> in rags, as if she came out
> of an ancient tragedy, actually her days are dull and tough
> in every grain a silent soul is hiding
> She writes poetry on the machine of the Chinese
> This old but fictitious medium. She installs herself
> in a working position at the assembly line,
> using her employee number to replace
> name and gender, by a lathe drill sands, cuts
> her heart is full of love and complaints, but there are people who wish
> to discover the depth of the times in these tempers
> yet she is hiding inside her meager body, using up everything
> to adore herself, these landscapes, rivers and the era
> these wars, capital, scenes, for her
> are worth less than this love (...)"[56]

This fragment shows that in the process of writing – which constitutes a moment of transgression for the alienated factory worker – a new subjective project emerges on the horizon of society. The speaking subject knows that she cannot be properly contained within the available representational discourse, in which the female migrant worker figures as a passive victim, one whose name and gender has been erased. In fact Zheng is aware of the fact that every text that she delivers will be misread and co-opted by others, but she does not cease to speak for herself. She does not want to be represented by women poets or intellectuals, but to be recognized by them as an equal, a poet.

[54] Zheng Xiaoqiong, "Wuye Nügong" [Female Worker at Midnight], in Zheng Xiaoqiong, *Sanluo zai Jitai shang de Shi* [Poems Scattered on the Machine] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Chubanshe, 2008), 37.

[55] See Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse*.

[56] Zheng Xiaoqiong, Ju [Play], in Zheng, *Sanluo Zai Jitai shang de Shi*, 26-27.